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April 6, 1997

Ed Lansdale on JFK and the Assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem

One night when the two of us were talking alone in his house in Saigon, Lansdale was telling me stories about his relations with Robert McNamara, and he told me how these had ended.

He said that in the fall of 1963, McNamara had told him to come with him to the White House for a meeting with the President. With McNamara the only other one present, Kennedy had told Lansdale he was ready to send Lansdale back to Vietnam to try to influence Ngo Dinh Diem. The specific objective would be to try to influence Diem to send his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu out of the country, along with his wife Madame Nhu. He asked if Lansdale was willing to go, with that mission. Lansdale said yes.

Then Kennedy said to him, "But if that didn't work out, or I changed my mind and decided that we had to get rid of Diem himself, would you be able to go along with that?"

As Lansdale told me the story, Kennedy did not use the words "kill" or "assassinate" in connection with Diem, but Lansdale said he was in no doubt that this was what was being discussed. (He didn't tell me, and I didn't know then, that there had been a number of earlier official discussions of such matters, in which

there was a verbal etiquette and idiom that the participants generally understood, ruling out use of these precise words. The Church Report later reported that Lansdale himself in 1961 had been strongly admonished for using the word "assassinate" in a secret memo alluding to a proposal of McNamara's about Castro).

Telling me the story, Lansdale relived the incident. He hesitated, his face got troubled, he shook his head slowly and sadly as he said, "No, Mr. President, I couldn't do that. Diem is my friend."

It was clear to him as he said, he told me, that he would not be going to Vietnam. The President seemed to understand his response and didn't say anything unfriendly or express disappointment. But the discussion was over, and in McNamara's limousine on the way back to the Pentagon McNamara was furious. He hadn't gotten on with Lansdale for a long time and this was the last straw.

He said to Lansdale, "You don't talk to the President of the United States that way. When he asks you to do something, you don't tell him you won't do it." Lansdale said that McNamara never spoke to him again.

Shortly after that Lansdale was fired by McNamara. He found a job with the Food for Peace program. On November 2, 1963, he was

finishing clearing out his desk in the Pentagon when he got the word that Diem and Nhu had been killed.'

[The rest of this file is, in effect, an End-Note]

1. Lansdale didn't make clear to me, nor perhaps was he entirely clear himself, whether Kennedy was proposing that Lansdale actually be in charge of or carry out the elimination of Diem. As I understood him, Kennedy was asking him, as a minimum, whether he could be involved directly in a policy that might come to involve the elimination of Diem.

Would it involve him in personal anguish, more than he could accept or than the President would wish to inflict on him? More specifically, could he be counted on to be loyal, not to obstruct it or to tell about it (or to warn Diem!), not to resign or withdraw visibly if the policy moved in that direction?

In declining, Lansdale wasn't threatening to reveal the idea or the plan or to take any steps to block it. He wasn't even saying that he opposed it as US policy (as Szulc did, addressing it as a hypothesis not favored by the President). I'm not even sure to this day what Lansdale felt about that, though it seems to me almost certain that he would have much preferred that Diem's life be spared, if not Nhu's. Phillips was later involved in an effort to this effect. He was just saying that he wasn't willing to feel personally, directly, involved, in Vietnam, in such an operation against his friend, even to know the timing or details.

[According to the movie Donnie Brasco based on the revelations of Joe Persico, if he had been in the Mafia, hesitating let alone refusing to carry out an order from the Don of Dons to kill his best friend would have led to his death, probably by his own best friend. But in the Pentagon his capo McNamara, who was not his best friend, simply fired him. And he still kept his mouth shut, except to me.]

Some comments on the context, implications and credibility of this story.

I wasn't so struck by the content of this story at the time, because everyone knew that Diem had been murdered three years earlier and I knew that our teammate Lou Conein had been the US liason with the Vietnamese generals who ran the coup and who had, Lou said, ordered the killing.

As with all of Lansdale's stories, I heard this more than once, perhaps two or three times. This one he always told exactly the same way, with the same expression and tone of voice. That wasn't always the case, and it gave me the impression that this wasn't one of the stories that was improving with retelling.

My father was a good story-teller like Lansdale, and his stories evolved a lot over time, becoming more dramatic, strengthening his own role, or ours if he was talking about his children, making a point more sharply. Lansdale was the same way, and I sometimes doubted whether some of the incidents he described had happened at all.

When people used to ask me how far you could rely on Lansdale's narratives, I would make the same comment that I made about Lou Conein. "With the life he's led, anything he tells you, no matter how fantastic, could be true. But anything he tells you,

even if it's his mother's name or whether it's raining outside, could be false."

Hearing him night after night over two years, I developed a sense that I found I could rely on pretty well as to how much and which parts to believe in a particular tale. In the circumstances of his telling me this one, I got a fairly strong impression that it was true.

This needs saying because this story, which I heard only when we were alone together, was a very unusual one, especially in retrospect. Thirty years later there isn't another one like it in any written account of any president or any prospective or actual assassination.

The whole system of management of covert operations is designed to provide a basis for "plausible deniability" of US involvement in illegal or morally objectionable actions, and above all, denial of Presidential involvement in them. But I wasn't aware when Lansdale told me this story of how particularly meticulous the system was when it came to hiding any evidence that a president had seriously contemplated or discussed, or had directed or even been aware of any attempt to assassinate a foreign leader.

This was a decade before it became common knowledge that the CIA had worked with the Mafia to kill Castro in the early Sixties. When President Ford let this slip in a meeting with the New York Times it led to the Rockefeller Commission's study of Presidential Involvement in Assassinations of Foreign Leaders and to investigations by the Church Committee, which the Rockefeller report was intended to preempt and shape.

What it found, as no doubt it was intended to do, was nothing but ambiguity about the actual role of presidents in what turned out to be a long list of CIA assassination attempts, including Castro, Trujillo, Allende and General Schneider (Chief of Staff of the Chilean Armed Forces who opposed a coup against Allende and was killed while "resisting an attempt to kidnap him"), Lumumba and Diem.

Neither Rockefeller nor Church ever found a single piece of paper directly implicating a president in one of these efforts. To an outsider this might seem strong evidence that none was involved, confirming the expressed judgements of nearly all their close associates that this was the case. But anyone who has been an insider at high levels in a secrecy system knows how many things are carried out without certain kinds of details ever being committed to paper.

In the investigations over the last fifty years of perhaps the

most exhaustively studied set of killings in history, with unique access to files the Nazi regime never expected to be captured, not one piece of paper has ever turned up confirming an order signed by Hitler to commence or pursue the Holocaust. But scarcely any historian other than David Irving has ever concluded from this that the annihilation of the European Jews was carried on without a direct order from Hitler.

In the interviews conducted by Rockefeller and Church, a number of CIA officials involved in assassination efforts stated that they had believed at the time, and still had no doubts, that their operations had been authorized by the "highest authorities," meaning the President. But no official stated that he had ever heard this directly from the President himself, with one exception.

Robert Johnson, who later worked on the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department under LBJ, reported that he had been assigned to write the minutes of an NSC meeting conducted by Eisenhower. He heard Eisenhower say to someone at the meeting that he wanted to "get rid" of Lumumba, which he understood to be a direct order to kill him. He said that he asked Bromley Smith, the usual NSC rapporteur, if he had heard that the same way, and if he should include it in the minutes. Smith said yes to the first question, no to the second.

This account by Robert Johnson is the single case of an

official reporting what he understood to be a presidential directive to kill someone, or even an expression of interest in it. Putting this on the record, Johnson once told me, had led to much criticism from his former colleagues and had considerably isolated him.

Why would Lansdale tell me this story and (according to them) not to closer team members like Conein, Reddick, Baker or Phillips? Unlike the others, we had both worked for McNamara. He was always pleased to have acquired as an apprentice one of the bright young men of McNamara, about whom he always showed much ambivalence, mainly dislike and resentment. In our conversation it wasn't a story about Kennedy or even Diem or Vietnam policy, but about McNamara, and how he had come to be fired by him.

I learned much later from reports of the Rockefeller Commission and the Church Committee that McNamara and Lansdale had both been involved earlier in discussions of assassination...of Castro. McNamara had raised this in a meeting, with Lansdale and others present, as a desirable option. For raising this at a meeting, McNamara was reproved by others, including McCone. Lansdale had followed up the meeting with a memo discussing this option, and he was strongly criticised by William Harvey, who was in charge of a group to conduct "Executive Actions" (assassinations), for ever putting this in writing.

It wasn't till reading the Church Committee report that I became aware, a decade after my two years with Lansdale, that from 1961 to early 1963, just two years before I joined him, he had been in charge of Mongoose, the largest CIA operation in the world up to that time, to overthrow Castro, under the direct supervision of Bobby Kennedy.

In countless long nights of drunken story-telling about past CIA adventures with Lansdale and his team, I had never once heard him mention the word "Cuba" or any indication that he had ever worked for Bobby Kennedy.

I knew that he had been skeptical of the Bay of Pigs operation, and I had the impression that he had managed to stay entirely clear of operations against Castro. Till reading those reports, I would have judged that it was impossible that he and his team-mates could have succeeded in keeping so completely from me through all those evenings any mention of this huge covert campaign, which he had actually directed.

Learning in 1977 how wrong that judgment would have been revealed to me, that late in the game, how little I knew about a secrecy system I had thought I understood pretty intimately. There were levels and practices of secrecy that I had been scarcely able to imagine, despite my dozen special clearances higher than Top Secret.

Why would JFK have made this approach to Lansdale?

Effort to overthrow Diem had begun in August of 1963. Schlesinger and Sorensen both chronicled this after JFK's death, but they take pains to dissociate Kennedy from personal involvement in it or belief in it. They both describe him as shocked by the news of the actual killing of Diem, and deny any awareness or desire by any American official of the generals' intent to do this. It didn't amaze me in 1966 to hear Lansdale contradict this version; what I didn't realize then was how extraordinary it was to hear an official do this, let alone to give a direct personal report.

Tad Szulc's account of a discussion with Kennedy in about the same time period is consistent, but has quite a different character. Kennedy told him that he was being "pressed" by others to consider assassinating Diem, and he wanted to hear Szulc's opinion of the idea, indicating that he himself was skeptical of it. Szulc says he reacted very negatively to the proposal. Kennedy said he agreed with him, and Szulc heard no more about it.

This in itself indicated Kennedy's awareness of the proposal and some consideration of it by him, but a basic skepticism. In Lansdale's account, Kennedy was telling him that he might decide to carry this out, and was asking Lansdale if he had any problem with being involved.

As for the basic objective for which Kennedy proposed to send Lansdale to Vietnam, to separate Diem from his brother and sister-in-law, that might seem to some in retrospect so infeasible as to make the account implausible. But actually it was being pressed on Kennedy by his ambassador in Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, at that time.

Lodge favored a coup, but he was actually increasingly hopeful that he might achieve by various pressures and direct persuasion by him that Diem would expel Nhu. If anyone could have achieved this, it was not Lodge or anyone else but Ed Lansdale, and many people would have told Kennedy this. So even if it was regarded as a very long-shot, Lansdale was the logical person, really the only one, for Kennedy to approach with this proposal.

Kennedy and even Lansdale would surely have seen it as a long-shot, so it would have made sense for JFK to have made it explicit that there had to be a fall-back plan. He would not have wanted to send Lansdale if he were going to feel tricked and used dishonorably in that likely case, especially if Lansdale might then obstruct it or even reveal it publicly. So I find the whole account coherent and plausible.

I never heard Lansdale express any bitterness or resentment of Kennedy for bringing about the death of Diem, even though he could well have felt that and I would not have been surprised at all to

learn it. He had no hesitation at all about expressing himself very bitterly and contemptuously about other officials, including McNamara and, for his position on Vietnam, McGovern. When he mentioned Bobby Kennedy, I sensed a reserve and ambivalence (though never a mention that he had worked under him, on Cuba or anything else) that he never showed when he mentioned Jack Kennedy.

Oliver Stone's theory (expressed to me, and hinted in his film on Kennedy) that Lansdale was bitter toward JFK because he had not made Lansdale ambassador to Vietnam in early 1961 or later, was not consistent at all with what I heard from Lansdale. He didn't hold Kennedy personally responsible for that; he attributed it entirely to bureaucratic enemies under Rusk and in CIA and DOD. And it was after Kennedy failed to act on that early proposal that Kennedy and Bobby entrusted him with a responsibility that was at that time even more sensitive and of higher priority than the embassy in Vietnam: direction of the Mongoose effort against Castro.

It would have been far more plausible to me that Lansdale could have been very embittered, to the point of being revengeful, for the killing of Diem. But despite what I have just said about his ability to keep secrets and to dissimulate as necessary, the fact that he never gave me any impression of this in the many conversations we did have about Vietnam (as contrasted with his total silence about Cuba) led me to conclude that he was not sharply opposed to the overthrow of Diem by that time, and that he

recognized that, for Kennedy as for the generals, Diem's assassination in that context was within the realm of prudent policy, even if Lansdale might have felt it wasn't the best course or was not carried out in the best way.

[Stone actually indicates in JFK that it was Lansdale who coordinated Kennedy's assassination from an office in the Pentagon. The character in the film, played by Donald Sutherland, who reveals this to Garrison, is modelled on Fletcher Prouty, who had worked under Lansdale in his office under McNamara. Prouty actually believes that Lansdale did play a major role in the assassination, having sent Prouty on a mission to Antarctica to get him out of the way (as described by Sutherland in the film).

One of Prouty's major pieces of evidence for this is a photograph taken in Dallas on November 1, 1963, in which Prouty confidently identifies the back of Lansdale's head. I certainly could not have that confidence, though I saw Ed from behind often enough.

But I would have a good deal of confidence that, just two years before I met him, Ed Lansdale did not have the managerial ability to run an operation like that, successfully. (His performance managing Mongoose did not contradict that). Moreover, he wasn't even operating in the Pentagon at the time of the Kennedy assassination, as the general who plays Prouty/Sutherland's boss in

the film, a Lansdale look-alike, is shown doing. Lansdale had already been fired and had basically moved to Food for Peace.

To repeat, it would not have surprised me at all (it would not astonish me even now) to learn that Lansdale had felt intensely bitter about the overthrow and assassination of Diem, who was in a sense Lansdale's political creation and about whom he felt very warmly and sentimentally. (There were stories about Diem that often brought tears to his eyes).

I could even imagine, if he did feel that way, an involvement with some of his rightwing associates, his sympathy with or even involvement in a conspiracy against the President. It would have been related to this episode (including, one might infer, his own firing), foreseeable in September and October 1963, not for the earlier snub on the ambassadorship which Stone mentioned to me. But I simply don't believe that he did feel anything like this either about the Diem assassination or about Kennedy in general.

From that, I repeat, I infer that by the fall of 1963 he had come to regard the overthrow of the Diem regime as at least understandable and reasonable, especially if he himself were not going to be sent over to mend matters, whether or not he saw it as the best policy. And I infer that within the context of overthrowing Diem, he saw the killing of Nhu, and hence even of Diem (who could have been expected to avenge the killing of Nhu if

he had lived) as reasonable, even if again he didn't prefer it.

[All these inferences could be checked with his team-mates, Phillips, Baker, Reddick and Conein, about his attitudes to the coup and assassination of Diem and about Kennedy.]

After hearing all this from me, Sy Hersh interviewed all the above. None of them had ever heard from Lansdale the story he had told me. But they all told him that I was a very reliable informant and that they found the story plausible.

Conein had already told me, in Vietnam, that General Minh had personally ordered the killing of the Ngo brothers. (They were shot, their hands tied behind them, in the back of an armored personnel carrier taking them from the church in Cholon where they had taken refuge back to the Joint General Headquarters). He didn't tell me when this order had been decided on.

Conein told Hersh that Minh had told him more than a month earlier that he would kill both brothers in the coup, to prevent their organizing resistance to or vengeance against the coup-plotters from outside the country, and lest Diem should act later to avenge the death of his brother and other relatives such as Madame Nhu or Can.

Moreover, Conein said he informed Ambassador Lodge of this in a written report, which he assumed had been passed on to Kennedy. There remains some possibility that Lodge had not passed on this information to the President. Certainly Lodge was more committed to the coup than Kennedy, who had reservations about its feasibility, and he conceivably might have withheld this part of the plan lest it deter Kennedy from proceeding. But that would be

dangerous and very unusual (not quite unprecedented) for an ambassador to do, and I think it is very unlikely.

So Kennedy almost surely knew this plan well before the coup. Moreover, Lansdale's account to me demonstrates that the proposal was not at all regarded by Kennedy as out of bounds. To the contrary, it indicates that he would have taken it quite in stride, or even as desirable (versus what he indicated to Szulc, after Szulc had expressed opposition to it).

Both of these reports put in question the meaning of accounts of Kennedy's shock and depression on hearing of the death of Diem. It's possible that these were his real reactions to the actual event; but not because it was unforeseen or even surprising. If Conein's report was passed on to Kennedy, as seems almost certain, then Kennedy let the coup plotting proceed in full awareness that it would have this end, and without expressing any reservations or veto to Minh's intention. In other words, Kennedy was fully and knowingly responsible for the assassination of his co-religionist ally.

(This was what Nixon most of all wanted to prove in 1971 when the publication of the Pentagon Papers raised the issue. He wanted to use it to defame Jack Kennedy in the eyes of Catholics [see my file on Nixon's objectives with respect to Catholic voters in 1972, and Colson's role in this] and thus to embarrass Ted Kennedy as a

possible candidate in 1972.

When Hunt couldn't find cables proving this--they weren't in the Papers or in the remaining files, which Hunt suspected had been cleansed--he was directed by Colson, almost surely with Nixon's knowledge, to forge a cable indicating it. This was one of the "White House horrors" of which Hunt was knowledgeable when he was arrested, which made Nixon insist that his silence to a grand jury be bought off. One more reason for the obstruction of justice that led to Nixon's resignation, and made the war endable.

Next story: my possession of cables--from Henry Cabot Lodge's personal files, shown to me in Saigon by his assistant Dick Holbrooke--that did make this point, not in the Pentagon Papers (and not going as far as Conein's account); my passing of them to Church and to Ted Kennedy (who did not publish them).]